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ABSTRACT

Ethnographic techniques are employed in this study in order to determine the extent to which curricula developed in magnet schools is distinctly different from curricula in conventional or nonmagnet schools. The variables examined and compared include: (1) subject matter offered; (2) instructional methods; (3) grouping procedures; (4) student and parent choicemaking; and (5) curricular policies. Preliminary findings reported indicate that although some variance exists between the two types of schools with regard to the variables examined, there is still too little data to judge the extent of the differences. (Author/EB)

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MAGNET SCHOOL CURRICULA: DISTINCTLY DIFFERENT?

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to compare conventional school curricula to magnet school curricula in order to determine any distict differences. Ethnographic techniques were employed for data collection. Comparisons were made in relation to subject matter offered, instructional methods, grouping procedures, student and parent choice-making, and curricular policies. Since the study remains in progress and the magnet schools have been in operation for no more than a year-and-a-half, only preliminary findings were reported. These results suggest partial movement away from conventional curricula in instructional methods and grouping procedures but not sufficient enough at this point to label the changes distinct. In the case of the other variables examined little change was observed from what might be expected typically in the conventional school.

MAGNET SCHOOL CURRICULA: DISTINCTLY DIFFERENT?

Magnet schools have been created primarily as a response to court-mandated desegregation efforts. The overriding assumption supporting their development has been that by instituting a specialized curricular program--emphasizing a particular content area, such as the performing arts, mathematics, science; a theme, such as careers, environmental problems, consumerism; or an instructional methodology, such as individually-guided education (IGE), open education, fundamental education--a balanced racial student population would be attracted to the magnet options.

As used in this paper, magnet school refers to an entire school site which has either been created or transformed for the purpose of offering specialized curricula: content area, theme, and/or instructional methodology. Also, enrollment is drawn from the entire school district. This definition is important because other labels, such as "paired schools," "triads," and "clusters" are sometimes equated with magnet schools. However, these types of schools are geographically limited within a school district to two or more schools in close proximity. They do not draw enrollment from the entire school district. Unlike magnets, these schools tend to continue to offer a conventional or non-specialized curricula. In some cases, small specialized programs (gifted, fine arts, careers, science, math) are established for a select group of students, but such programs are limited in scope.

Magnet schools have been both hailed as highly successful and disclaimed

as creating educational inequities. Typically, accolades flow from school district evaluation branches charged with internal evaluation responsibility. For example, in Cincinnati and Houston data on achievement in reading and mathematics, attendance by frequency and by race, student and parent attitudes toward the magnet schools, staffing costs, transportation costs, and per pupil expenditures have been collected for several years. These reports outline problems as well--from transportation delays to failure to acquire appropriate instructional materials. For the most part, the reports are skimpy collections of numerical data set in appendices. Despite superficial data analyses each report claims that the magnets are creating excitement and innovation and are meeting objectives set forth (Felix and Nieman, 1976; Nieman, 1977; Cunningham and William, et al., 1977).

Working with similar data bases, critics of magnet schools reach different conclusions. Arnove and Strout (1978a:3) have warned that "magnet schools represent privileged subsystems within large urban school districts" and consequently serve students who have always been "best served and who have achieved most . . . ." Examining one-year's experience with magnet schools in Los Angeles, the Magnet School Monitoring Committee called magnets "an ineffective instrument for desegregation (Trombley, 1979).

The continuing debate on magnet schools appears ludicrous because it is more self-serving than it is rational. Conclusions are being tossed playfully around on the basis of cloudy and insufficient data.

Picking up on this point as he looked at the data on magnet schools in Boston, McMillan (1977:159) noted that "there is only the sketchiest evidence available to explain why magnet schools attract. Nor has the School Department initiated research that might shed light on the attractive characteristics of magnet schools." After a thorough examination of the literature, Rosenbaum and Presser (1978:157) further elaborated on the woeful lack of research data on magnet schools. They noted:

> [U]ntil now there have been virtually no objective studies of magnet schools. Most reports are short summaries of official policies and administrators' proud statements of their accomplishments, often written by school officials themselves. As yet, there have been no reports that attempt to analyze the problematic issues the magnet school concept raises, to examine their actual operation--as opposed to administrators' perceptions--or to look for specific evidence about their successes and failures.

Prompted by the inadequate data generated by most previous research studies on magnet schools, the present study was undertaken.

The purpose of the study was to look narrowly and in-depth at six magnet schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) to determine the extent to which curricula developed in the magnets was distinctly different from curricula in conventional or non-magnet schools. Curricula was defined broadly to include educational content and other experiences of students for which the schools accept responsibility. In some form curricula reflects participatory planning

or consultation with community groups and agencies. Curricula often embodies, directly or indirectly, ventures that introduce or stress values in the learner's society which schooling can communicate (Shane and Weaver, In press). Accordingly, the following variables were examined: (1) subject matter emphasized, (2) instructional methods, (3) grouping procedures, (4) student and parent choice-making, and (5) interrelationship among curricular policies and practices.

Method

An ethnographic approach to studying the six magnet schools was selected for the following reasons. First, certain roles had been established for the researcher which enabled him entry to persons and to data otherwise unavailable or difficult to obtain. Second, it was decided that more descriptive data on the actual development and operation of the magnets could be obtained by continually working in the schools. Finally, since quantitative data were already being gathered by the LAUSD Research and Evaluation Branch, it was felt that descriptive data would be complimentary.

Establishing the ethnographer's role

The researcher assumed several roles in gaining entry into the six schools. These roles included what Kahn and Mann (1969) have described as (1) dual or multiple entry and (2) contingent acceptance at successive organizational levels. In the former case, the researcher

could enter the schools as an independent evaluator[1] or as a consultant with the District's Magnet School Office.[2] In one of the schools, the researcher taught a curriculum course in which many of the teachers were enrolled.[3] In the Magnet School for the Arts and Sciences, the researcher worked as the University of Southern California Coordinator.[4] Through either staff development work or the formation of friendships, the researcher was acquainted with some of the teachers in the six schools prior to the research study. Table I provides an overview of the multiple roles the researcher could use in gaining access to people and information.

Insert Table I About Here

Different roles afforded contingent acceptance at successive organizational levels. For example, serving as the USC Coordinator for

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[1] As an unpaid "independent" evaluator under contract to L.A.U.S.D., the researcher was required to formally visit the six schools and collect data four times during the year. Other visits could be scheduled.

[2] For from six months to a year preceding the opening of the six magnet schools, the researcher was released one-third time from his teaching load at the University so as to work with the L.A.U.S.D. Director of Magnet Schools. This work involved all aspects of planning magnet programs--from student recruitment to developing curriculum objectives.

[3] EdCI 599, "Curriculum Development in Alternative Schools," a credit course at the master's degree level was taught in the Area 5 Alternative School under the auspices of the Cycle XII National Teacher Corps Project. The class met once a week on Mondays for three hours. Other visits were made in connection with the course.

[4] The researcher was appointed by the Vice President of USC to a position labeled University Coordinator. Responsibility focused on sharing University resources with the elementary magnet school next to the University.

the Magnet School for the Arts and Sciences meant occasional meetings with the Superintendent of Schools. the School Board Chairperson, and District advisors for real estate, legal affairs, finances, curriculum, instruction, and research and evaluation as well as contact with Deans from three schools at the University: Performing Arts, Education, and Engineering. Working with the Director of Magnet Schools led to close interaction with an ESAA funded School Integration Team which was responsible for school site selection for "pairs," "triads," and "clusters" and for transportation to the sites. Also, the researcher in this setting was afforded access to a curriculum committee which packaged magnet program designs. Acceptance at these organizational levels would have been impossible or at best difficult or strained if it had not been for the formal roles assumed during the study.

Hypotheses generation

Unlike experimental studies in which hypotheses are developed for predictive purposes, in a field study one does not begin with hypotheses "but rather with tentative assumptions about the phenomenon being studied" (Lutz and Ramsey, 1974:5). These assumptions are revised and refined during the course of the study. In the end, the ethnographer "arrives at statements which account for as many of the observed facts as possible with the greatest degree of economy, simplicity, and elegance possible"--statements which Overholt and Stallings (1976:14) have called "theoretical generalizations." As a result, the ethnographer is "much more in the

hypothesis tailoring than the hypothesis testing business" (Overholt and Stallings, 1976:14).

At the outset of the present study, several assumptions were outlined in relation to the five variables selected for analysis:

(1) subject matter offered in magnet schools will be much the same as that in conventional schools;

(2) instructional methods will vary in much the same way in both magnet and conventional schools;

(3) grouping procedures will vary more in magnet than in conventional schools and will be related to the type of magnet curriculum;

(4) student and parent choice-making will be more available in the magnet schools, but the level of knowledge for making choices will not be much different from that in conventional school settings; and,

(5) curricular policies and practices in magnet schools will be contradictory in some cases, politically motivated in others, and aimed more for a public relations effect than for substantive curriculum change.

Data collection procedures

The researcher used the preceding tentative assumptions as a guide in the process of data collection. Interviews and informal conversations with teachers, students, administrators, and parents and observations of

of meetings and classrooms were designed to gather data in order to revise and refine the assumptions. Table II shows a set of questions written to guide the researcher in collecting data on parents' knowledge about magnet school curricula. Similar outlines were formulated so as to structure data-gathering for the other variables.

Insert Table II About Here

Three types of sampling were used in the study. The quota sample (sampling from certain categories of persons or roles not unlike representative sampling) was used in instances where only certain persons were likely to have desired information. For example, when the researcher examined policies on teacher selection for magnet schools a sampling of area superintendents and magnet school principals was necessary since they were the persons responsible for implementing the policies. When the practice of teacher selection was analyzed, the sample was expanded to include teachers who had applied for positions in magnet schools and who had been screened by the selection committee.

A second type of sampling used was the snowball sample where informant information led the researcher to other persons--not unlike reputational power studies. For example, in two of the six magnet schools changes in the principalship meant that the administrators who had originally worked in the schools had assumed other responsibilities in the district. As a result of conversations with the current principals, the principals in charge when the magnets were first developed were located. Subsequently,

these former principals were contacted and interviewed.

Hypothesized variable sampling was also used in the study. This method was used in cases where theory led the researcher to investigate certain relationships within the magnet school setting to see if the theory held true and under what conditions. For example, it was theorized that during the implementation of organizational policies, as in the case of selection of teachers for the magnet schools, that political assocations and friendships rather than competence in subject matter or curriculum leadership would serve as an overriding guide for hiring. Results of the study to date have verified this theory in each of the six magnet schools.

Notes were not taken <u>during</u> interviews, informal conversations, and observations so as to maintain an atmosphere of trust and confidentiality with persons in the schools. Only during telephone conversations were notes recorded simultaneously. Whenever possible, notes were written in longhand immediately following an interview, conversation, or observation. Thereafter, these notes were transcribed into typewritten form (Cf. Appendix A). These notes were then filed in folders in two ways: first, according to school and second, paragraphs and sections of notes were cut and sorted according to variables examined in the study.

The study was further organized by keeping a monthly log. In the log the data collection format (interview, conversation, document, observation) was indicated. Dates of data collection, persons, places, and times were also recorded. This procedure helped document the way in which the study was conducted.

Data analysis

Analysis of the volumes of data collected in an ethnographic study is particularly troublesome since there are no simple ways to reduce these data (Hall, 1978:16). One of the ways data were reduced in this study was to match data collected with the five variables examined. Data considered unrelated were not discarded, but simply set aside temporarily. During analysis, it was apparent that new insights sometimes led to reconsideration of data placed in limbo.

A second round of analysis of data moved from the logic of relation between the five variables and the content to criteria of proof. While it is not the purpose of the ethnographer to manipulate social phenomena so as to support or refute hypotheses, it is critical to his work to collect sufficient repeatably verified data in order to provide inferences from the field study. In this study, Becker's classic work on proof in field research was used (1958). The four steps requisite for making inferences in field research were: (1) data verifying the existence of an event or phenomena and its relationship to a concept or theory, (2) data showing that the event or phenomena is usual or typical within the setting studied, (3) data taken singlely and collectively ordered in such a way as to explain a total system, and (4) concluding presentation of data substantiating the model developed. This final step is completed after all data has been collected.

Preliminary Findings

Before examining the extent to which magnet school curricula might be distinctly different from conventional school curricula, conventional school curricula needed defining. Accordingly, on the basis of interviews with curriculum supervisors, principals, and teachers, analysis of curriculum guides, and classroom observations the following general characteristics were attributable to conventional school curricula:

(1) subject matter emphasized the basic skills of reading, writing, and computation. Commercially produced grade-level texts were assigned in all classrooms;

(2) instructional methods emphasized a combination of lecture, small group work, and individual study during class time. The higher the grade level the greater stress placed on the lecture method. In the earlier elementary grades large and small group drill in basic skills was predominant;

(3) grouping procedures within classes focused on ability levels because of wide disparities among student achievement. For the most part, students were grouped according to grade level, then sub-grouped in assigned classrooms;

(4) student and parent choice-making in the conventional school was limited to issues largely external to the curriculum. Participation in parent advisory groups or in student councils and committees was encouraged, but discussions and

considerations focused mainly on extra-curricular issues, such as fund-raising activities, graduation ceremonies, awards banquets, and the like.

When examined in comparison to the preceding description of conventional school curricula, certain preliminary findings can be noted. These findings are considered preliminary within the context of this study for several reasons. First, data collection and analysis remains in progress. Second, the six magnet schools have been in operation for a year-and-a-half or less; hence, data may only provide glimpses or tentative indications of directions in curriculum development. Third, insufficient data have been collected to date for discussing the five assumptions in detail. With these limitations in mind, the preliminary findings are presented.

Subject matter offered in magnet schools will be much the same as that in conventional schools

For the most part, subject matter emphasized in both the magnet schools studied and conventional elementary and secondary schools is nearly identical. Magnet programs which are created using existing schools tended to reflect the curricula of their predecessor. For example, the Lomita Elementary School, once it became the Fundamental Magnet School, maintained a content emphasis largely unchanged. Even in newly-created magnets, basic skills--reading, composition, mathematics--

dominated the curriculum. District-adopted text materials remained the center of attention.

One observed difference in content focused on its organization. For example, the Center for Enriched Studies claimed an "integrated" curriculum; the Magnet School for the Arts and Sciences, a cooperatively planned magnet with the University of Southern California, adopted a "thematic" approach, combining content from the Fine and Performing Arts, mathematics, and science. Another difference observed between the magnet school curricula and conventional school curricula was in enrichment opportunities. For example, in the Magnet School for the Arts and Sciences, intensive group instruction as well as individual training was available in dance, music, drama, and other Arts. Nonetheless, at this point, these curricular changes appear largely as attachments to what can be described as the conventional school curricula.

Instructional methods will vary in much the same way in both magnet and conventional schools

In selected instances instructional methodology varied between magnet and conventional schools. For example, in the Magnet School for the Arts and Sciences attempts to team teach were made. However, what has resulted to date has been team planning, but individual instruction. In the Center for Enriched Studies cross-age tutoring has been introduced using students from an adjacent high school as instructional aids. In the Lomita Fundamental School computer-assisted instruction was used as

a part of remediation in language and mathematics. While these magnet schools offer illustrations of distinctly different instructional approaches, the extent of use was not so widespread as to say that conventional school could not or have not adopted the approaches as well. Furthermore, the other magnets relied heavily on teachers' working with twenty-seven students in self-contained classrooms. The degree of instructional variety appeared to hinge on the organization of the curriculum, prior teacher behavior, and access to technology or new materials. Within-school variances confounded the problem of describing accurately the degree of instructional innovation found in a particular magnet school.

Grouping procedures will vary more in magnet than in conventional schools

Grouping procedures in both magnet and conventional school was similar in most cases. With the exception of the Center for Enriched Studies, where multi-age grouping had been implemented, students have been grouped according to grade levels and/or ability as measured by standardized tests in reading and mathematics. While there was much talk among magnet school principals about getting away from "labeling" students on the basis of achievement, there were no new grouping policies written or procedures implemented.

Student and parent choice-making will be more available in the magnet schools, but the level of knowledge for making choices will not be much

different from that in conventional school settings

Parental choice-making offered a distinct difference between magnet and conventional schools. However, the difference was limited in several ways. First, hypothetically, any parent in the school district could elect to send children to a magnet school. A 60-40 racial quota (either/or 60 percent Anglo, 40 percent minority) restricted either Anglo or minority enrollment based on population needs of a particular magnet school. In general, there were more opportunities for Anglo parents to enroll their children in magnets than minority parents because of enrollment needs.

Second, information on the nature of magnet school curricula was so sketchy that parents possessed little understanding of what might occur instructionally in the magnet schools they chose for their children. Third, students who achieved successfully in school were the most likely to get information about magnet school opportunities to their parents. As a result, parents of the more talented children tended to apply for magnet school slots. Fourth, many parents aggressively sought to enroll their children in magnet options in their own neighborhood so as to keep children close to their home. Fifth, non- and limited-English speaking parents, despite information presented in their language, demonstrated a severe lack of understanding of magnet programs. In sum, while parental choice-making offered a distinct difference between magnet and conventional schools, the choice-making was restricted to school selection--a decision

few children could influence. Otherwise, the parental and student participation was limited to advisory councils and committies as in the conventional school setting.

Curricular policies and practices in magnet schools will be contradictory in some cases, politically motivated in others, and aimed more for a public relations effect than for substantive curriculum change

One of the foremost policy concerns rested on the extent to which magnet schools could attract a racially-balanced student enrollment. For the two alternative schools in the study, maintaining an already integrated setting was no problem since the schools had been in operation for nearly seven years as "public alternatives." As magnets, their enrollment figures were more carefully examined each semester.

In the other magnet schools studied reaching and maintaining racial balance was problematic. The Science Magnet created in a racially-isolated minority community could not attract a single Anglo child, even though the curriculum was highly academic and the teachers as well trained and competent as comparable teachers in other schools. Only two nuetral sites within the inner-city, the Magnet School for the Arts and Sciences (associated with the University of Southern California) and the Center for Enriched Studies (housed in the Wilshire Temple until the beginning of the fall semester) were able to obtain sufficient Anglo enrollment to be operated as magnet schools. Magnets created in predominantly Anglo neighborhoods experienced similar, but much less

severe enrollment problems. Changing birth rates, loss of jobs, middle class flight and other factors will likely continue to affect racial subscription to the magnet schools.

Preliminary findings related to two other magnet school policies were particularly intriguing. One policy outlined teacher selection procedures. As in parental choice-making, all contracted teachers were informed that an open application process would be instituted. An underlying assumption of this procedure was that teachers with a background matched to the type of magnet created would likely be hired. For example, it was assumed commonly that teachers with special expertise in the Arts and Sciences would be selected for the Magnet School for the Arts and Sciences. Other factors affected the openness of staff selection, including: whether the hiring committee had informally or unofficially selected teachers for the school prior to the screenings, whether a teacher of a particular race was needed to meet racial guidelines for staffing magnet schools, or whether the magnet school was created in an already existing school. In the latter case, most teachers who had worked in the school the preceding year were rehired.

Another policy provided more funding for magnet schools than conventional schools; hence, financial disparity emerged as another distinction. From as little as $50,000 to as much as $250,000 was earmarked for individual magnet schools. These monies afforded greater flexibility for curriculum development in magnet schools. Yet, whether these monies have been instrumental in moving magnet school curricula beyond the limits of the conventional school remains debatable.

Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this study has been to generate sufficient data to describe in greater detail the curriculum development in magnet schools. The intent of analysis has been to raise questions about the extent to which magnet school curricula differs or will differ distinctly from the conventional school to justify its being labeled a magnet and its being given supplementary resources beyond those available to conventional schools. While it is too early to judge the extent of distinct difference between magnet school and conventional school curricula, it is hoped that continued in-school data collection will provide sufficient objective information so as to enable policy-makers and curriculum planners alike to make wise decisions affecting the education of children enrolled in schools undergoing pressures from court-mandated desegregation.

TABLE I

MULTIPLE ENTRY INTO THE SIX MAGNET SCHOOLS

	TYPE					
SCHOOL	STAFF DEVELOPMENT	UNIVERSITY COORDINATOR	INSTRUCTOR	INDEPENDENT EVALUATOR	MAGNET OFFICE CONSULTANT	STAFF FRIEND
Arts and Sciences	X	X		X	X	X
Fundamental School				X		X
Center for Enriched Studies				X	X	X
Science				X	X	
Area 4 Alternative School	X			X	X	X
Area 5 Alternative School			X	X	X	X

TABLE II

QUESTIONING GUIDE:

PARENTS' KNOWLEDGE ABOUT MAGNET CURRICULA*

1. In which magnet school is your child enrolled?
2. Why did you decide to enroll your child in this magnet school?
3. What is a fundamental magnet school?
4. How does a fundamental magnet school differ from a center for enriched studies?
5. What happens during a typical day at your child's school?
6. In a couple of sentences, how would you describe the way the teachers in your child's school teach?
7. Is there much discipline in the school?
8. What subjects does your child study?
9. Is there much homework assigned?
10. Does your child get many opportunities to decide what s/he wants to study at school?
11. How did you find out about the magnet school in which your child is enrolled?
12. How do you continue to get information about the magnet school in which your child is enrolled?

*Suggested list of questions. These should be used flexibly within the context of the interview.

APPENDIX A

TRANSCRIPTION OF INTERVIEW

Lomita Fundamental School
Summary Report-Visit 1
Wednesday, November 29, 1978

This report is based on conversations with Wales Purdue, principal and Mary Barstow, a staff member as well as observations of classrooms. The Lomita Fundamental School opened in February, 1978. Historically, the neighborhood has been a white enclave. In the past couple of years there has been a continual influx of Asians. Largely because of the desire of the white community to keep its children in a community school, parents recommended the creation of a magnet program at Lomita Elementary School According to the principal, both the community and the school has been conservative Most notable illustration of this point is the fact that the school turned down opportunities to participate in AB65 and ECE programs. The school has never received Title I funds These factors likely explain the implementation of a "fundamental" education orientation.

The fact that the school and the community has been racially isolated is related to the selection of activities to enhance academic achievement and integration Items 27 and 28 emphasize multicultural activities; item 12 stresses human relations activities These selections were stimulated by the dramatic change in the school population, including as of November, 1978 in grades K-6: Hispanic, 14.6 percent; black, 19 8 percent; Asian, 5.8 percent; Filipino, .9 percent; American Indian, .9 percent; Anglo, 58 percent When combined, the racial breakdown includes 42 percent "combined minority," 58 percent white. Fifty-four schools feed students into the school.

Recommendations and suggestions for important activities came from concerns of the staff and the principal. These suggestions emerged as a result of problems that were discovered while implementing the magnet concept. For example, the transition from teaching Anglo students to working with a racially-mixed student population presented an initial concern. While black teachers tended to be very strict with black students, white teachers treated them much more casually. The inconsistent discipline led to staff development activities aimed at developing uniform standards of expected behavior as well as discussing student-teacher relations. A workshop was held November 30 and December 1 which had as its objectives: "To develop an increased awareness that American society is composed of many cultures which express their unique heritage through the ways in which they meet their basic needs," "to obtain information of available Multicultural Educational/Human Relations materials," and "to construct manipulative multicultural materials for classroom use." Activities focused on the application of concepts to classroom instruction.

Another recommendation supported strongly by the administration and staff emphasized strengthening of the academic program. Special magnet funds were used to hire three teachers, one to work with grades 1-2, another to work with grades 3-4, and the third to work with grades 5-6. Also, as a part of the effort to improve academic excellence, a computerized diagnostic and prescriptive program was established. Students who perform below expected achievement levels are pulled out for remedial work in areas of need: decoding, comprehension, or math skills.

At this point, the principal indicated satisfaction in progress being made in program development. While no other modifications have been made in

the program than those cited above (ESAA sessions focusing on human relations and multicultural education and changes in the academic area), there are several proposed activities. These include: giving an award to the "Citizen of the Week;" a Bill of Rights essay program; a Christmas program emphasizing decorations, songs, customs from various cultures; a spring multicultural art exhibit to go along with "Open House;" a carnival of multicultural foods; and a spring play based on a multicultural theme.

The most important activity during the planning, opening, and first month's operation was the orientation meeting for parents, children, and staff Each child at Lomita wrote letters to incoming children so that everyone would have a "pen pal" or friend upon arrival Transportation for parents and children was provided. A local McDonald's restuarant contributed lunch Parents filled out enrollment forms, toured the schools, and asked questions of the staff Special activities were held to get the children interacting

Three activities are being planned currently One is the organization of an orchestra comprised of 85 children Another is the "Mimes Program" which brings mimes into classrooms in order to help children explore their values and attitudes A career program which brings "significant college people" to the school to talk about their occupations is also being implemented.

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